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FICTION

The circumcision

A short story

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So, the circumcision day is set. A local circumciser, or hazam, will do it. Pintoo is becoming a wimp. Not about being circumcised, but about the hazam's work. What if he makes a mistake and cuts his nunu? To err is human, he read in the English translation book. Who has not heard that doctors leave scalpels in the patient's tummy? The hazam, on the other

hand, is just a traditional circumciser. What if he goofs up and cuts the penis? He's not an angel. Only angels never mess things up.

This is the time of the strikes. Schools are shut down; so, no study, only play. From morning to noon, and into the afternoon – the entire day – play, play, play. At such a great time, how can parents be so unreasonable? When every kid is out in the playground, Pintoo will have to go through this cutting. Good lord! He'll be stuck in bed, god knows how long, with the pain.

"Pintoo, you're becoming a full Muslim, eh?" Rony taunts at the playground.

"A full Muslim?"

"Yeah. Getting circumcised means becoming a full Muslim. It's on Friday, right?"

Pintoo nods. The news of his coming circumcision has spread around the neighbourhood.

"You know how they do it?"

Pinto says nothing.

"Simple as water. Even I can do it. Take scissors. Pull the foreskin. And snip-snip."

Later, Babool refutes Rony. "You believed Rony? Nine out of ten of his words are lies. I'll tell you how they do it. They use razors like barbers do."

"Does it hurt much?"

"Umm... it depends."

No scissors, then? The heart-stopping snip-snip leaves him shaken. Pintoo can believe Babool. He went through the traditional circumcision. That was before Pintoo's family moved into this neighbourhood. Rony was circumcised

right after birth. He has a tendency to make up stories. And talk dirty. About girls, you know. For instance, the other day he said he'd seen Laboni's mom in the dead of night.

"I was up for a pee. I looked outside the window and there she was. Stark naked."

"What?"

"I swear to god. She was standing in the veranda."

"You're lying."

"Go ask her if you don't believe me."

Pintoo lacked the guts to go and ask Laboni's mom. So he had to kind of believe Rony.

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Grandpa goes to the mosque five times a day to say his prayers. The rest of the time he reads the Quran. Pintoo asks him whether it is really necessary to be circumcised.

"Yes. All Muslim boys do it," Grandpa says.

Pintoo wishes he could be like his friend Ajay. A Hindu. Ajay is lucky not to undergo this cut. "Grandpa, why do all Muslims have to do it? What difference does it make?"

"It's good for cleanliness."

"Then why don't the girls do it as well?"

Grandpa laughs. "You have no brains, little man. Do girls have the thing like you?"

So, girls are lucky. If only he were a girl! When he was little, Ma used to dress him like a girl. He saw it in old photos. With a bob haircut, he looked like a real girl. But a few years later, his sister was born, so Ma gave up on him.

"Grandpa, you've been circumcised, right?"

"Of course."

"Even Pa?"

"Sure."

"When?"

"Your Pa? When he was a small boy."

"Was Pa frightened?"

"Maybe a little. But not like you."

"I'm not frightened."

Loudspeakers in the mosque announce the call to noon prayer. Grandpa goes to the toilet. When he comes out, his hand is inside his lungi, touching his private parts. For about five minutes he will walk back and forth like this. And cough, on and off.

"Grandpa, why do you do this once you're out of the toilet?"

"Oh," he smiles. "I am old, little man. After urinating, I make sure not a single drop defiles me."

***

Friday morning. All the neighbourhood boys are out on the playground. Pintoo stays home. The hazam arrives around ten. A tall, dark, long-haired man. He has a little bag with him. All his circumcising instruments are there. A sharp, straight razor, a bandage, what else? Pintoo peers at the bag nervously. Last night he struggled to sleep. As soon as he closed his eyes a knife, a blade, a razor and a pair of scissors would start dancing in his head. And then there was that snip-snip snipping...

The hazam has yellowed, crooked teeth. He looks horrible when he laughs. He talks to Pa and Grandpa, tells them the dos and don'ts for after cutting. They drink tea and discuss politics. Strikes, price hikes, the military, the killings and so on.

Ma prepares Pintoo, has him wear the floral lungi purchased for this occasion.

Finally, Pintoo sits on the circumcision stool. In front of him sits the yellow-crooked-toothed hazam on another stool.

"What is your name, son?"

"Washiqur Rahman Pintoo."

"And you go by Pintoo?"

"Yes." His voice falters as he sees the hazam opening his little bag.

"How old are you?"

"Turning ten next year," answers Grandpa.

"Listen Pintoo boy. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's a matter of a minute." From his side, the hazam readies the bandaging and tape.

Where is the razor? The barber razor? Pintoo cannot see any.

"Better remove his lungi," the hazam tells Pa.

The shame, the shame! The yellow-crooked-toothed hazam orders Pintoo to strip. When was the last time he stripped from the waist down? And now he is seated with his nunu exposed. Exposed for all to look at.

"Hold his legs from behind," the hazam instructs.

Pa complies. From behind he slips his hands between Pintoo's thighs and holds them apart.

"Turn his head aside, Grandpa."

Grandpa also complies. He turns Pintoo's head to one side and covers his eyes. Now Pintoo cannot see what will go between his legs. How will the hazam do the cutting? What instruments will he apply. A barber razor? A knife? Scissors?

"Pintoo boy, are you scared?" The hazam touches his penis.

Pintoo gulps for air.

"You're a man. Not a woman. Men don't get scared." The hazam pulls his penis. "It's nothing. You'll feel like an ant bite. It'll be over in a minute."

A minute? Does a minute consist of sixty seconds or sixty minutes? It's been ten minutes since the hazam announced *it's a matter of a minute*. He must be dull at mathematics. That is why he is in this grim profession. Who would take up the job of touching others' penises otherwise? Now, should Pintoo count on him? A dull-headed hazam is very likely to make a mistake. Pintoo starts praying for the hazam. Just then, he feels that something is pressing his penis' skin. He moans.

"Do not move, Pintoo boy. It will hurt if you move."

Pintu sits hard, hard. But his heart is bursting open, open. Just then, he cries from a sharp pain.

***

Pintoo is in bed, on his back. His groin is covered by the newly bought lungi. So, at last he's been successfully circumcised. It appears the hazam didn't goof up. He is not as dull as Pintoo feared. What's more, the actual cut sort of felt like an ant bite. The painful part was after the cut, while the hazam was working on the bandage.

"Brother's naked. Brother's naked."

Pintoo glared at his little sister.

"Go away. Leave him alone." Ma commands.

As the burning sensation dies down the day after, Pintoo tries walking. With one hand he has to lift the lungi a little so it cannot rub against his bandaged penis. Being careful with every step, he waddles like a duck.

In the kitchen he finds Ma cooking sweet zarda rice. It will be sent to the houses of neighbours, relatives, friends. Why? You send them this and let them know that a circumcision has taken place. In return they will come to see you.

"What will they bring, Ma?"

"How am I supposed to know? Maybe sweetmeats. Cakes."

"Really?"

"Possibly."

Well, this is something then. Pintoo's friend Jewel underwent circumcision during the summer holiday. His parents arranged a circumcision party at a banquet hall. It was as good as a wedding reception. Guests attended with gifts. There, on the stage in the hall, Jewel was sitting with his lungi on. He looked like a clown because lungi is homewear. Not a party dress.

"You're wearing a lungi *here*?" Pintoo scoffed.

"What did you expect me to wear, idiot? Tight jeans?"

***

Three days later, Pintoo walks to the playground. He can't take part in sports or games. But he can watch others. How can one be stuck at home all day? He cannot run or even use two hands at a time. One hand must lift the lungi cloth to keep it from touching his groin.

"Hey, circumcised boy!" Rony says. "Want to play? Go get your marbles then."

Pintoo shakes his head. To play he has to squat, which is impossible.

The next day he goes with his marbles. He is unable to squat. If they allow it, he will play, bending forward to hit the marbles. He waits for a call.

Delwar is smoking in a corner. He flunked his final exams the year before and dropped out of school.

"Oi, Pintoo!" Delwar hollers. "Come here."

Pintoo goes.

"What's wrong with you? Why're you holding your lungi like that?"

Pintoo doesn't answer. Why should he? Everyone knows he's been circumcised. And if they don't, it can be understood from the way Pintoo is

holding the lungi cloth. Plain and simple.

"Oi! Don't you hear me? Tell me what's happened there."

"I, I have been..." Pintoo melts, blushing.

"Yes? Go ahead. You've been what? I want to hear." Delwar comes up to him.

Pintoo looks the other way.

"You're such an undisciplined boy. You won't answer me, right?" Without warning Delwar pulls the floral lungi.

Pintoo hasn't wrapped the lungi tightly around his waist and so it comes off. And in the middle of the playground Pintoo is naked from the waist down. A hysterical laughter breaks out. Quickly, Pintoo wraps his lungi around himself again and backs off. He picks up a piece of brick from the ground to throw at Delwar's head. The shithead must bleed. But he holds off. Delwar is a troublemaker. All his brothers, too. His big brother is in jail. If Pintoo does such a thing, Delwar might come back with a hockey stick to take revenge. And you know what parents are like. They will say it's all Pintoo's fault. Why is Delwar after you? Why not Rony? Or Babool? You must have done something wrong. So, Pintoo lets it go. He burns to swear at the shithead. Dirty swearing words that will directly disgrace Delwar's mother. But his mouth is good for nothing. Filthy, foul words do not form there.

***

At the end of the first week, auntie Fufu comes with pastries. In the second week, almost every day, somebody visits. Cakes, cream rolls, laddoo, sandesh and kalojaam sweets fill the house. There is too much to eat. Has Pintoo ever gorged on this many sweetmeats? Not in his life.

"Ma, wouldn't it be great if I had a little brother?"

"Why? You don't like your sister?"

"Yeah, I do. But if I had a brother we could have him circumcised. Then people would bring sweetmeats again. It's fun, no?"

Ma laughs.

Pintoo asks how many visitors are remaining. Will they all come next week and the week after?

"You can't expect everyone to bring sweetmeats for you," Ma says. "Some may not come." She counts with her fingers. "Yes, next week will be good as well."

After next week, it is all over? No more sweetmeats? Maybe Pintoo can find some faults in the hazam's cut. So that the yellow-toothed hazam will have to come back to fix it. There could possibly be another cut. And another cut means cooking sweet zarda rice over again. Eventually, there would be visitors with sweetmeats once again. Sounds good, no?

Pintoo checks his crotch carefully. The cut is healing. The first few days he had to take pills for the pain. Now Pa gives him only one pill before he goes to bed. One more week and he can start wearing trousers, Pa said. Beneath the healing cut, Pintoo spots a hair. A fallen hair from his head is stuck there. Oh my, it hurts as he tries to weed it out. Shall he call Ma? No. Ma is a girl, she can't help. Perhaps Grandpa can.

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"Pintoo! Pintoo!"

Pintoo goes to the window. Outside is Babool.

"We're flying kites today," says Babool. "You want to come?"

"Kites? Now?"

"Ya. On our roof."

Pintoo turns and sees Ma is standing behind.

"No. Stay home." She says.

"Ma, it's just kite flying. No running, no jumping."

"I said no."

"Why?"

"Soldiers are patrolling the street."

"We'll be on the roof. We won't go to the street."

"Shut up. Have you forgotten what you did last time?"

Pintoo turns to Babool. "You go. Ma won't let me."

Pintoo doesn't want to remember what he did last time.

It was the kite-flying Sakraine festival. On this day, kites fill the skies like whirling birds. And the air buzzes with kite fighting. It should be called Kite Fighting Day. But what Pintoo enjoys most is the kite running. So, last time, he was running after a cut kite. It landed in a dirty alley. When you are after a cut kite, you don't bother looking down. Always up, up. Always be as clever as a crow. A second late means other running boys will catch it.

In that dirty alley there was an uncovered manhole. Pintoo took a big step and fell. Oh shit! It was really real shit. His left leg dipped in real shit. Thank god, the manhole was shallow. He managed to rescue his leg. Watching this, the boys behind him had the best, biggest laugh in their lives.

It was an unspeakably awful moment.

After that event, the neighbourhood boys started calling him 'Poop Pintoo'. It took months to drop the title from his name.

***

Noon the next day, it's unusually quiet at the playground. Most of the boys haven't come yet. Pintoo finds Rony and Ajay playing cricket.

"Hey, circumcised boy," Rony calls out. "Come join us."

"No, I can't. Let's play tops."

Yes, Pintoo can play with tops. He can walk fine now, without lifting his lungi. It's just that his walking is a little slow.

Malek the garage boy arrives. His clothes are always black and greasy. But today they are not.

"Hey, Malek!" Rony says. "You're not working today?"

"To hell with work! It's curfew everywhere. You kids don't have a clue what's going on in Dhaka."

"Bah, curfew!" Ajay shrugs his shoulders. "So what? We can't play here?"

Malek says he attended the protest yesterday and witnessed a killing.

"We were shouting 'Down, down, down autocracy! Bring, bring, bring democracy!' Then the police fired. One guy collapsed straightaway. He was right next to me, I swear."

"Let's go see the curfew," Rony suggests.

"No, they'll shoot you." Pintoo shakes his head.

"You gutless kid. The streets are as empty as the desert. How do you think I came here? By flying? No one's there to shoot you."

It is true. There is not even a stray dog in the main street. If you take a right and walk about fifteen minutes, you can get to Pintoo's school. If you take left, there you will see the railway line and bazaar.

Malek scuttles down to the middle of the street. He claps and dances. "Come here, you chickens."

This is a clear insult. Malek, the son of a maid, a garage worker, who never went to school. How dare he call the well-read boys chicken? The boys look right and left and then advance.

"Now say with me," Malek tells them. "Down, down, down autocracy. Bring, bring, bring democracy."

The boys repeat.

"Fire, fire, fire. Set fire everywhere," Malek cries, raising his fist.

The boys repeat.

From across the street there come another group of boys to join them.

Malek takes the lead. "Down, down, down with Ershad. Set fire to his seat."

A middle-aged man joins them with a flag. They all circle the street.

"The military! The military's coming!" someone screams. "Run, run!"

Pintoo reaches the side of the street. Malek, Ajay, Rony – all ahead of him – take to their heels towards the alley. Pintoo swings his head. Are they really

coming? The military? Yes, a military jeep is coming from the bazaar road. Pintoo takes a short jump to slip into the alley. He missteps. His foot plunges into an open drain. "Ouch," he shrieks for help. But neither Malek, Ajay nor Rony look back. Oh God, the military jeep is nearing. One soldier is positioned with a rifle. Will he shoot Pintoo now? Pintoo attempts to lift his right leg from the drain. Up to his waist he is covered with the filthy, foul-smelling dirt. The thick slime is as pitch black as his fountain pen ink. Across the street he can see Mollah's pharmacy. Had it been open, they could have spotted Pintoo in this state and come over to help. Why is he so stupid? Why does this always happen to him? Once in a shit manhole. Now in a drain. Ouch, his leg hurts. Is it broken? Oh no, he is bleeding from the crotch. Is his thing broken too? They... they are close... close with the rifle.

An olive-coloured jeep screeches to a halt. The standing soldier with a rifle aims at Pintoo.

"You dirty son of a bitch!" another soldier yells. "What're you doing there?"

Pintoo cannot speak.

"Hiding with a petrol bomb? Eh?"

Pintoo shakes. The army has weak brains, he heard Pa say. Their left-right parade brainpower is good for a gun, but not to run a country. It seems Pa is right. What is one supposed to do in a dirty drain? Swim?

"I... fell," Pintoo stammers.

"Fell?" the soldier looks round his fellow troopers. And they all hee-haw.

"You little dick. Why're you out in the curfew?" As punishment, the soldier tells Pintoo to strip from the waist down and walk home naked.

Pintoo can no longer feel the pain in his groin. What should he do? Gallop naked like a terrified dog? That carries its tail between its legs? No. His right

hand collects a lump of yucky gunk.

"Oi, get up! Hurry!"

Pintoo gets up.

"Now strip."

Pintoo glimpses the alley out of the corner of his eye. He needs no more than four seconds to cross it. Then he will vanish into the buildings. Without a second thought, he flings the gunk at the soldier and breaks into a sprint.

Two seconds... three seconds...

The rifle roars.

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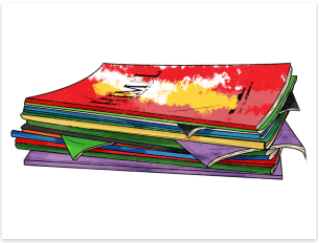

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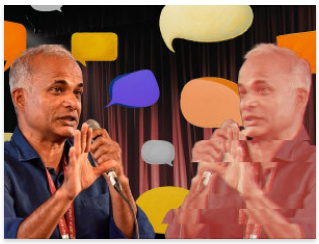

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